

Drawn to the Light
Epiphany - January 4, 2009
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Matthew 2:1-12
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Is. 60:106

In the bleak mid-winter, I love building a fire in our wood burning stove. While sipping a hot drink, I sit entranced before the flickering flames on a small stool made many years ago by John's grandpa, Andy. Equally soothing is sitting on the recliner next to the stove with a good book and my soft blanket, made by a dear friend. All my senses are engaged in these activities. I am drawn to the warmth of the fire, the light of the flickering flames, the odor of the burning wood, the crackle of the logs and the taste of good tea (or coffee) :-)

On a warm summer day, I am drawn to something completely different. If I could, I would spend more time at the ocean. I am drawn to the seashore. I love the sun shining brightly over the water, the sound of sea gulls, the smell and taste of salty air. I find great delight in playing in the sand, even as an adult, or walking the beach, collecting seashells and assorted creatures. And nothing can compare to the soothing sound of the water lapping the shoreline, the waves crashing upon the beach, the tides moving in and out, in and out.

All of us are drawn to special places and experiences that capture us in some unique way. What might they be for you?

Not only are we drawn to places, experiences and things, we are also drawn to people. We might be attracted/drawn to people who stimulate our intellect, capture our imagination, move us with their passion. Any number of things or characteristics in a person might draw us to them. The warmth of their personality, the calmness of a gentle spirit, the depth of their spiritual faith, the attractiveness of their smile, the joy and delight of their humor, the serenity from their inner peace.

When we are drawn to something or someone, we become engaged with them. It is not something we observe passively, but rather it is an experience, a place or person with whom we want MORE. We want to

repeat the experience, or visit it again or be with the person more frequently. We are drawn in.. we are drawn to.....we want to follow.

In the OT reading from Isaiah 60:1-6 we read of the prophet's words that announces a new day for the people of Jerusalem, paints a new vision for the reestablishment of Jerusalem as a beacon for others, a light for all nations. The light of God's glory has dawned. Even though darkness covers the earth...is all around them, the prophet proclaims, "today God rises on you, his glory breaks over you and nations will come to your light....they will be drawn to that light." In the previous chapter of Isaiah, we read that it was because of Israel's sinfulness, their own wickedness that prevents them from salvation, but now things have changed. It is a new day. It is time to rise up, to shine, to get out of bed, to put on a new face, one that reflects the glory of God. Look up! Look around! Watch as they gather. Your sons and daughters are returning home. There will be a big reunion. It is time for their spirits to be renewed! The light breaks forth into the darkness as God enters into their brokenness. The light will shine, the light will prevail, will pierce the gathering gloom and guide them toward a life of wholeness. Arise, shine! It is your time and now nations will be drawn to you! You, O Jerusalem, will be a beacon to them!

In Matthew's gospel we see that the magi also knew what it was like to be drawn to something, something so powerful and unique, that it, too, penetrated the darkness and beckoned them to follow, to search, to question, to seek, and to find. In Matthew's gospel, the beacon is not a nation, but a star that leads the magi to the Christ child, the true light. In the ancient world it was commonly believed that when the birth of a great ruler occurred there would be signs in the heavens that accompanied that birth. The delegation from the east, the magi, claimed to have seen such a sign and made the pilgrimage to Judea to find this ruler and worship him. In Matthew we read that when Herod is still king, this delegation arrived in Jerusalem. They are depicted as Gentiles, non-Jews, but they are seeking a king of the Jews. They are not ordinary Gentiles, but rather the spiritual elite of the Gentile world. When they come seeking this king of the Jews, they embody the promise of Isaiah 60:3, "*Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*"

In both Matthew and Luke's gospel, the birth of Jesus is disclosed to a select group of persons. They set out to discover the child, they find him in Bethlehem. But the two groups who receive this news are about as different as can be. In Luke, the good news is proclaimed by a host of angels to an assorted group of hard-working, rough and tumble shepherds who lived on the margins of Jewish society. Yes, they were Jews, but often living on the edges, not part of the inner circle, more often than not, considered "outsiders". On the other hand, in Matthew's gospel, the news came to a group of elite Gentiles from a foreign country, with no connections or real link to Jewish faith and life. True, they were from the 'upper crust' we might say, but Gentiles? true outsiders! In both gospels we are reminded that the visitors who come looking for Jesus are outsiders in one sense or another, one because of low social class and standing, living on the margins of Jewish society, the other because of being non Jews, Gentiles, a separate group.

Magi and shepherds will be included in the salvation which Jesus brings. Lowly shepherds and wise men were drawn to the light of Christ. Having heard of a new king's birth, the outsider Gentiles follow a star, seeking the child. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy! And when they entered the house and saw Mary and the child, they knelt down and worshiped him.

What did King Herod, the insider, do when he heard about a new king's birth? He and all of Jerusalem were frightened, fearful, and the news evoked all kinds of consternation and leads Herod to seek to destroy Jesus.

Matthew's gospel account reminds us that, as commentator Richard Gardner writes, "*Jesus is at one and the same time the **king of the Jews** and the long awaited world ruler whom all the nations will honor and serve.*" (p,50 **Matthew commentary**)

People of all classes and cultures and language groups will be included in the salvation which Jesus brings. People are drawn to the light. Boundaries and barriers between people and nations crumble when we all kneel to worship the Christ child, the one who welcomes all. (*Taize services when we kneel around the cross, bringing our prayers, burdens.... powerful image of being one in Christ..not knowing each other, yet feeling the spirit at work among us*) The welcoming face of

God reaches out in loving hospitality to all peoples and nations. The light of Christ shines upon us, and in our faces we should reflect that light to others.

As we begin this new year, 2009, what is it that we are drawn to? What is welcoming us, inviting us? Who or what star are we following? Are we drawn to something that reflects the light of Christ? Are our choices and decisions good ones, ones that we can embrace wholeheartedly and know that what we are doing illumines for us and others the welcoming face of God?

This is the last Sunday in our sermon series which began on Nov. 30, Advent 1. The overall theme, "*Let Your face shine*", you saw every Sunday on the beautiful bulletin cover that Joe Alderfer designed, along with Bonnie's stain glass and Ervin's photograph. That theme is not only a plea to God, to let his face shine on us, but it is also a call for us to become part of the shining transformation of our world. The writers for the material used during this season stated, "*Our faces can reflect the light of God as we welcome the Divine to dwell among us, embrace the way of Jesus, work for justice, and open our arms to include all whom God welcomes.*"

In New York Harbor stands the Statue of Liberty. On the base of that pedestal a poem by Emma Lazarus is engraved. Many of us would know parts of that poem....*Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door.*" In the 19th and early 20th centuries millions of immigrants of northern, southern and eastern European descent came to our shores through those waters. After being greeted by the Statue of Liberty and processed at Ellis Island, these immigrants purchased tickets and boarded trains at the Central Railroad of NJ terminal, that took them to new homes throughout the US. This became an historic gateway for millions who desired so much to see their hopes and dreams realized in this new land of America.

Today we continue to have people entering our country, our towns and neighborhoods. They come from different parts of the world. They

too, come with hopes and dreams. How are we the welcoming face of God to our new neighbors, classmates, co workers?

We also know that living among us are people suffering with mental illness, facing challenges of no work, or health care, people dealing with PTSD. How are we the welcoming face of God to these within our community?

In the last few weeks I received two e mails from Brooke Rodgers, the ED for HARTS. Both pertained to families in need. Each had several children and needed housing. She was writing to me as a member of the board, saying she would send us in the new year demographic info that she was compiling. But then she adds, (quoting from her letter), *“The demographics will not tell you the individual stories that are incredible and very sad...the stories that provide some insight into why a person is chronically homeless or a family suddenly faces homelessness. This is proving to be an exceptionally challenging time for all of us and I find it particularly difficult for those who are finding themselves homeless for the first time and for those that are chronically homeless. Your support has been and continues to be immeasurable to the success of this program. Support in providing shelter, meals, fellowship, donations of personal items for the shelter, your response to housing the families that are coming to HARTS, serving as members of the Board of Directors, others serving on committees to address health needs and housing needs and your very important financial donations. You are truly a community, expressing your humanity in caring for our homeless individuals and families....HARTS is evidence of that.... and for all of this I am very grateful. I will also say...each guest in the shelter has expressed their thankfulness for the shelter, for preparing meals for them and treating them like you would want to be treated. Thank You!*

Beginning Jan. 12, we will be hosting HARTS for one week and then again the end of Feb. for another week. I know that Shirley B. Yoder has been busy organizing the volunteers from here and several other churches that will be helping us. Contact her if you want to be involved. Things may already be covered.

On Friday, Jan. 23 another event being planned by our Missions Commission will be held here. Music to Warm the Hearth, will be a musical event for all ages and will be a fundraiser for People Helping

People, another organization in Harrisonburg that is being stretched financially and in other ways to meet the increasing needs within our town.

As we embark on this new year, 2009 and embrace our own personal journey and our journey as a congregation, how are we being drawn to be the light of Christ in this time and place? How may we be the welcoming face of God in all that we do?

May God give us courage, wisdom and insight for this journey.